

# **Students developing critical evaluation skills as part of peer and self assessment**

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## **Initial research question**

Does the introduction of peer support work help students expand their skills in critical reflection as they progress in higher education and towards gaining a professional qualification such as Qualified Teacher Status?

## **Background and Rationale**

This CELT project is part of the University's commitment to widening participation. The project team has considered undergraduate students' engagement with the learning and assessment processes. The study is focussed on trainee teachers and their Level 2 studies. Tutors examine the teaching/learning approaches which best promote the development of reflective practice as part of teacher training and review the theoretical basis of one specific strategy – the introduction of peer partner review.

The relevant literature centres on formative assessment in Higher Education and consideration of involving students in peer support and self-evaluation. Researchers in the field have questioned whether this involvement can enhance learning and develop better study performance.

## **Broad studies concerning assessment within higher education.**

In common with other phases of education, assessment within a higher education programme is considered a necessary and integral part of learning and teaching. Falchikov (2005) outlines the main reasons that it is necessary for: measuring individual achievement; assessing group learning; checking collaborative learning. Biggs (1999) and George & Cowan (1999) elaborate by suggesting that summative assessment is important for certification and also for monitoring the effectiveness of teaching, whereas formative assessment is important for checking the student's development and potential. In the situation of this current project the tutors/researchers are interested in strengthening a particular form of assessment measure, i.e. ongoing portfolios kept by individual students to evidence their progression in English (knowledge and skills) at level 2.

Differing forms of assessment have been used within higher education and, writing in 1987, Rowntree questioned whether these were truly formative in terms of the student's growth and personal development. Dochy, Segers & Sluijsmans (1999) suggest that traditional instruments are less likely to measure higher-order cognitive skills. Over recent decades of using diverse, but traditional, methods awareness has increased amongst researchers that changes must include self assessment if the measures are to be

truly formative. Struyven, Dochy & Janssens (2005) reviewed student perceptions of assessments in higher education and found that student study behaviour is influenced by the assessment modes in use. The review cites studies where three main approaches to learning are identified amongst student groups. These can be summarised as: surface approaches where the learner describes an intention to complete the learning task but does not engage significantly with the work; deep approaches to learning where the learner has an evident intention to understand the study material and where learning outcomes are therefore of a higher quality; and thirdly an approach which is both strategic and achieving. The latter is characterised by students aiming to achieve the highest possible grades by being well-organised and conscientious and managing their time effectively. These authors, considering the approaches in relation to other studies including UK-based work, concluded that “Inappropriate assessment procedures encourage surface approaches, yet varying the assessment questions may not be enough to fully evoke deep approaches to learning” (Ramsden, 1997 *in* Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005, p. 328).

Falchikov (2005) questions whether assessing by traditional methods encourages a passive ‘consumerism’ on the part of learners and, if so, how this can be conducive to effective motivation. Boud (*in* Falchikov, 2005) believes that effective learning requires learners to be influencing their own progress rather than waiting for others to do it for them.

Another important consideration is provision for students from diverse backgrounds. In meeting the needs of the many mature learners who enrol on our courses – those who may, for instance, come with non-standard qualifications - we want to be certain of a relevant approach. Hoult (2006) refers to Dewey (1938) with the following quotation: “Dewey (*Experience & Education*, 1938 *in* Hoult, 2006, p. 29) says: ‘for the adult educator, helping adult learners to recognize the strength of their own previous experiences is quintessential to their progression.’ ”

Addressing the students directly Hoult (2006, p.102) also writes about ‘measuring your own learning and responding to grades and assessments’, making the suggestion that “Ideally you need to be able to shift your perception away from the grades as decided by other people and move towards an understanding of your own academic progress that is underpinned by a deep and genuine appreciation of what is needed to improve your work and this is informed, but not limited by, your tutors’ grades.”

We would like to encourage all our students to be aware of this approach. Wiliam & Black (1996) give evidence from research literature that formative assessment, whilst improving standards, particularly helps low achievers. An aspect of inclusivity in our courses is the support of the student with dyslexia. Apart from university-wide principles, we are interested in developing practical support within our modules for such a student to achieve well. The student’s self evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses will be important, as is the communication of this self assessment to members of staff.

Summarising the evidence regarding encouragement of deep approaches amongst any students, our review concludes they can often show the extent of their learning better and demonstrate their learning over the span of a programme, through alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios and with the inclusion of self assessment approaches.

## **Self assessment**

Boud (1995) sees self assessment as a vital skill within lifelong learning and emphasises the role of self reflection in this learning. Boud states that the two key elements of assessment, developing knowledge and also understanding the criteria involved in measuring this, are important, but should be kept in proportion. Both are important to the course in question at the School of Education, University of Wolverhampton.

Although the context considered here is initial teacher training, there are similarities with other professional groups. Nursing education, for instance, also engenders the combination of gaining knowledge alongside professional skills and competence, for example, Bedford (2002) and McFadden (1995), and Boud (1995) refers to the fields of law, engineering, social work and medicine. Self evaluation and the ability to develop further knowledge and skills on the basis of such reflection are already required within teacher education through the formal Professional Standards for teachers. This is in addition to the academic reflection required to attain a qualification in higher education. Boud (1995, p.15) comments that it is evident that students do not enter higher education with this skill fully developed and he refers to an underlying trait "Self assessment is concerned with learners valuing their own learning and achievements on the basis of evidence from themselves and others."

Falchikov (2005) highlights the question of power, examining the key differences between traditional and alternative assessments. She identifies lack of learner power in traditional methods, whilst alternative forms of assessment are characterised by the way in which they give some degree of power to the learner. Falchikov is clear that by the 1980s a number of studies have recognised that student involvement brings benefits and that the 1990s have produced further evidence of these advantages. Hall (1995) uses the term "co-assessment" and (reported by Falchikov, 2005) suggests that some studies where simple changes can have the effect of empowering students.

Self assessment can be viewed as either a process or an activity, and may include the practice itself or the goal to be aiming towards. Brew (*in* Brown & Glasner, 1999) refers to the way in which some course structures in higher education have inhibited the development of self assessment skills by ignoring either its formal or informal use (or both). In examining the connections between reflection and self assessment, Brew makes the important distinction that all self assessment involves reflection, but not all reflection is self assessment.

## **Developing self and peer assessment**

As self assessment is currently used in a variety of ways, the question arises as to how its skills can effectively be promoted. Brew *in* Brown & Glasner (1999, p.160) says "Students need systematic practice in judging their own work and getting feedback on their ability to do so."

The skills and benefits of self assessment may sometimes be used in conjunction with self assessment and we are interested in the way skills may overlap from one to the other. When peer assessment is combined with tutor assessment, the term 'collaborative

assessment' is used (Somervell, 1993). Peer assessment, reports Brew, can refer to both peer marking and peer feedback; sometimes they are combined.

Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner & Strijbos (2005) suggest that peer assessment can be a form of collaborative learning. Their study, in a computer supported learning environment incorporating peer assessment, examines the improvement of 'content related' performance which they label as a first order learning goal, with acquisition of peer assessment skills, termed a 'higher order goal'.

Falchikov (1995) suggests that students involved in peer commentaries need to know why they are being given a wider role; detail of this role has to be explicit within the course. Researchers find that support may be necessary because students can be unsure of their own skills to undertake the re-defined role.

"They need to learn how to become thoughtful and reliable assessors, in the same way that beginner teachers do. What might we do to help our students gain these skills and confidence in their ability to use them? First of all, they need *training* in self- and peer assessment, so they can begin to develop the necessary skills. Giving students training in peer assessment and the opportunity to *practise* it, has been found to be beneficial (e.g. Cheng & Warren, 1997)."

(Falchikov, 2005, p.158)

In effect, students become partners in the assessment process. However, in some studies this skill building has been shown to be less successful; for instance, Catterall (1995) found more than half of students involved in one particular study still reported lack of confidence at the end. We would therefore be interested to find, within our own work and the investigations of others in higher education, ways of building the relevant skills in a positive way and of working towards the achievement of those higher order skills identified by Prins *et al.* (2005) above.

Van den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot (2006) examine several course designs in university teaching where peer assessment is included. To do so, they distinguish between different functions of feedback: analysis, evaluation, explanation and revision (related to student academic writing). They also refer to earlier work by Lockhart & Ng (1995) who pose a typology for the interactions of students during feedback: authoritative, interpretative, probing and collaborative ways of interacting. In contrast particularly with the authoritative reader (who points out mistakes), the probing and collaborative reader of the other students' work is regarded by the van den Berg study as adopting a 'discovery mode'.

The van den Berg study found that a substantial majority of students (some working with peer groups and some not) expressed a preference for working with peer assessment (ie. with peer support). Most teachers in the study thought peer assessment could stimulate discussions on subject matter between students in an effective way. A combination of written and oral feedback appeared to improve the feedback functions although most interactions were of the evaluative mode (probably because the construction and timing of the task inhibited a discovery approach). We return to a consideration of these factors in our own conclusion to this review and for our future planning.

Within the field of teacher education, such as our own, another recent study with several notable findings is that of Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel & Merriënboer (2002). They point out that critical evaluation of peers is particularly important in teacher training. Their findings show that providing peer assessment training can lead to positive effects on skills. The tasks required of students were meaningful tasks (see also Struyven (2005) above) on designing creative lessons. The training itself included discussion of constructive feedback and skill training in 'judging the performance of a peer' where students saw that novice assessors use words such as 'nice' and 'good' instead of more 'substantiate' words. In other words they were introduced to the idea of giving feedback from a more expert standpoint. The 'trained' students were more likely to comment according to particular assessment criteria and they also gave more constructive feedback in peer assessing, than did the other groups.

## Portfolios

Brown (1997) calls the portfolio a personal record of learning. Falchikov (2005) refers back to an earlier definition of Arter & Spandel (1992) which features both learning and assessment, commenting "A purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s)".

Race (*in* Brown, 1998) includes portfolios in a list of formats which are suitable for a peer assessment approach. An underlying familiarity with the assessment requirements is considered necessary and Race also suggests using assessment criteria devised by the students themselves. Portfolios are one of the written assessment measures which may prove less problematic for a dyslexic student. Peer support, where oral as well as written feedback, is promoted may be particularly helpful. Hout (2006), in regard to mature learners, describes the approach to learning they will encounter and have to take into account. A section on 'the meaning of study and learning' advises that the intervals between periods of self-study are important - in her opinion, it is often these which bring about the 'really big breakthroughs in learning' (and many of us would agree with this in respect of ourselves as learners). We question whether peer supported work and reflection may be significant to the effectiveness of these interludes.

Challis (1999 *in* Falchikov, 2005) lists the benefits of portfolio-based learning. These include the way in which it encourages reflective learning; enables the consolidation of links between theory and practice; and allows evidence of learning from a range of contexts. In Farmer, Riddick & Sterling (2002), some tutors reported that in literacy skills the support provided for dyslexic students would probably also help other struggling students. An education tutor comments on how fundamental course and assessment design can influence students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Self advocacy in this by the student with dyslexia is viewed as a major enabling factor. It may be that peer work offers further scope for this.

Falchikov (2005) points out that several examples of portfolio use come from teacher education (e.g. Halsall, 1995); and she goes on to examine issues in assessing portfolios. Challis (*in* Falchikov, 2005) puts forward guidelines for assessing portfolios, including evidence of individual learning and a consideration of the way learning is explained in a reflective manner. Birenbaum's four-point scale for judging a portfolio is repeated in Falchikov (2005) and provides a useful example of numerical values related to criteria -

4 points for a portfolio with “Rationale for choices clearly stated and reflects well grounded self-assessment” compared with 1 point for “No picture of student as a reflective learner” (Falchikov, 2005, p.19).

Klenowski, Askew & Carnell (2006) take a case study approach so that (amongst other measures) reflective statements can be gathered and course tutors can make observations about the learning processes in action. The research is focused on advanced diploma work and masters courses; in one case study, the module includes a portfolio to help participants chart their learning throughout the course; in the second case study, the portfolio is intended to support students in participating fully in their learning and using their time productively; the third case study demonstrates portfolios as learning records and as a record of individual academic or professional change. The writers demonstrate in the discussion of case studies that portfolios can be about changing student approaches to learning, but may also bring about a changed approach within teaching, stating that “With the use of learning portfolios the tutor’s responsibility shifts from being an expert, in a one-way communication to the student, to a guide and facilitator.... Analysis and reflection are integral and ongoing processes that are facilitated by tutors carefully constructing questions that push the learning through the cycle of doing, reviewing, learning and applying that understanding” (Carnell & Lodge, 2002 in Klenowski, Askew & Carnell, 2006, p.280).

This attribute of portfolio learning and assessment is said by the writers to promote a student’s meta-learning where an inner cycle of the ‘do, review, learn, apply’ becomes reviewing/learning about/applying the content, i.e. reflecting on learning about their working practices and reflecting on learning about learning. Klenowski *et al.* (2006) report that course participants as trainee teachers say that awareness of their own learning process helps them to understand their pupils’ learning and how better to support it. It is apparent from their description that self-awareness and self assessment are integral to the process. The study also demonstrates yet again the effectiveness of learning which engages students in a group approach. It raises the question on our part as to how effective this promotion of meta-language might become if peer support is integrated into our teaching.

## **Outcomes and Benefits for our current teaching**

Although this literature search is too brief to cover many complexities, it is apparent from consideration of the above evidence that portfolios:

- are a valuable and viable alternative form of assessment;
- can promote both self assessment and reflection;
- produce evidence in a range of contexts that reflective learning takes place (Challis in Falchikov, 2005).

Where self assessment and peer support are incorporated, the changes in learning and teaching are inter-related (Klenowski *et al.*, 2006) and the introduction of new approaches appear to require care in explanation to students of their ‘new’ role (Falchikov, 2005). Our own understanding of these points has informed our work with students throughout the year. For example we decided that it was our role as tutors to make the process of student involvement explicit. More detail of our tutor progress and evaluative comments are given in Appendix iii. Skills building is also necessary, so that students can become more ‘expert’ in feedback for instance and that the skills can be developed through ‘practice’ (Struyven *et al.*, 2005; Sluijsmans *et al.*, 2002). What

appears to be important is the structure of the portfolio and the timing of tasks (Challen in Falchikov, 2005) and we have not been able to make immediate changes in these but can do so for the next academic year. The idea of promoting individualised learning through portfolios, in this case in English modules, has considerable pertinence to initiatives within our own and other universities currently.

We have incorporated into our teaching throughout the year such adaptations as feasible, for instance building student feedback skills. This was supported by the CUREE (Centre for the Use of Research & Evidence in Education) National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching – which we encountered at a timely point in our planning of 2006/7 modules. Our work throughout the academic year with our trainee teachers has therefore incorporated some materials from the Framework. It has enabled us to share with our students the concepts, principles and aims of co-coaching, which we think ally closely to our ideas for learning with the support of a peer partner. The Framework also highlights the skills that a co-coach might need and might develop in his/her role, giving students awareness that this is a mutual process in which both can hopefully benefit. After these introductory sessions, the ‘practising’ of skills came during regularly timetabled peer partner activity with portfolios. Both oral and written feedback to each other was incorporated. Some detail on the questionnaires appears in Appendix i and it should be borne in mind that these were exploratory investigations only. Piloting of these will act as underpinning for Phase 2 investigations. Outcomes shown by questionnaire responses (from beginning and end of module teaching) and in terms of the student’s evaluative comments are attached as Appendices ii and iii. There is some commentary contained within the appendices but no attempt is made to analyse in detail here because of the pilot nature of the investigation. Similarly, Appendix iv with tutor “diary” notes shows “work in progress”.

## **Future Developments**

Our adoption of the outlined approach is built on our work in education over a number of years, predominantly in schools, but we find that the ideals of supporting any learner to gain the skills of self assessment and reflective learning are, if anything, even stronger within the higher education setting, where the capacity for developing reflective practice is obviously greater in this age and stage of education. The literature shows changes to be particularly beneficial where academic and professional skills training are intertwined and where students are drawn from diverse backgrounds.

There are, in the other materials examined here, several other key points:

- Students can gain from collaborating in the devising of assessment criteria; our module could have criteria (possibly based on the Birenbaum four-point scale) to inform our own and students’ portfolio evaluations.
- Peer assessment is most successful where students are given opportunity to develop the necessary skills; in this approach, these skills have been described as a higher order goal (see Prins *et al.*, 2005 above) for students to achieve; a discovery mode of working seems to depend on interactions being early in the assessment process (van den Berg *et al.*, 2006); skills training could also promote the meta-learning (Klenowski *et al.*, 2006) which we think our students need in order to become reflective teachers and there is more to be done to further develop this within our teaching.

- The relationship between tutors and students can be changed and it is advantageous to learning that students become more than ‘passive consumers’ and learn to take responsibility for their own progress (Falchikov, 2005); because this a ‘sea change’ of approach for many of our learners, it is necessary to promote this continually.
- There are complex factors at work, which will be specific to our own situation and teaching and particular to our own students; these are worthy of further and continuing inspection through our own reflective practice, highlighted by Phase 2 investigations.

## **Further Developments**

As we look ahead, we know that there are considerable changes to be made. However, discovering through initial work and piloting the potential of this approach, we consider that other modules within the postgraduate course can benefit from its introduction. For academic year 2007-8 we intend:

- To revise the portfolio contents and timescales to ensure that peer partner feedback is accessible at key points in its compilation; to propose a criteria for marking which differentiates the different qualities of submitted work within the “pass” grading.
- To continue the module introduction to peer support work with further building of feedback skills.
- To emphasise the links to self assessment and reflective practice, including incorporating a Learning Journal for the first time.
- To modify the questionnaire in order to probe more deeply the skills and any shift in learning which may take place; to incorporate some “free” writing evaluation reports which may help us to interpret the issues, for instance in students’ perceptions of their development as teachers.

The postgraduate course being offered from September 2007 includes considerable elements of Level 4 study and the extended evaluative/reflective skills of students will be key to their success in achieving this. A modified teaching/learning approach, and the evidence which we collect regarding its impact, will be important to the development of all our students.



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## Appendix i QUESTIONNAIRE EVIDENCE

The questionnaires are intended as a pilot version for Phase 2 research in this project (2007/8), but have also proved valuable in checking the changes being put in place for teaching groups during 2006/7.

One format was introduced at the beginning of the module as a check on students' prior experience with portfolio assessments; an adjusted questionnaire was used at the end of module teaching to ask students about their views and further experience. Because of adjustments to be made for Phase 2 they are not cited here in full, but an outline is given below.

Sample questions were:

*How well do you feel you were supported throughout your Year 1?*

*By your peers? By your tutor?*

This was to be graded on a scale [1-5] of "very little support" to "a lot of support"

*[Results: see Chart 1 in Appendix ii]*

They were also asked to grade comments on a scale [1-5] from "disagree" to "agree".

Examples:

*I think that students can learn skills so they can participate in their own assessments more*

*[Results: see Chart 2]*

*I think it has been useful getting to know my peer partner as a colleague to work with*

*[Results: see Chart 3]*

*I am able to analyse the work of a peer*

*cf end of module: I am better able now to analyse the work of a peer*

*[Results: see Chart 4]*

*The portfolio tasks had practical relevance to my training as a teacher*

*I developed a lot in my teacher training as a result of the portfolio work*

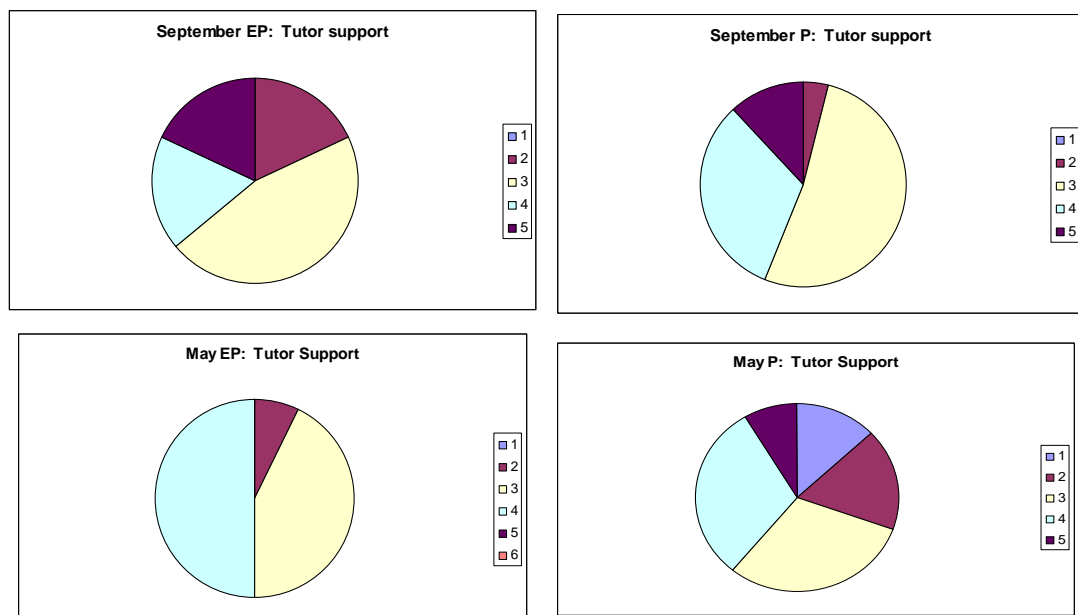
*[Results: see Chart 5]*

## Appendix ii

### SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES.

Results for key elements of the questionnaire have been tabulated as percentage responses for each point on the scale [1-5] and separate representation is given to Early Primary [EP] teacher trainee students and Primary [P] trainees.

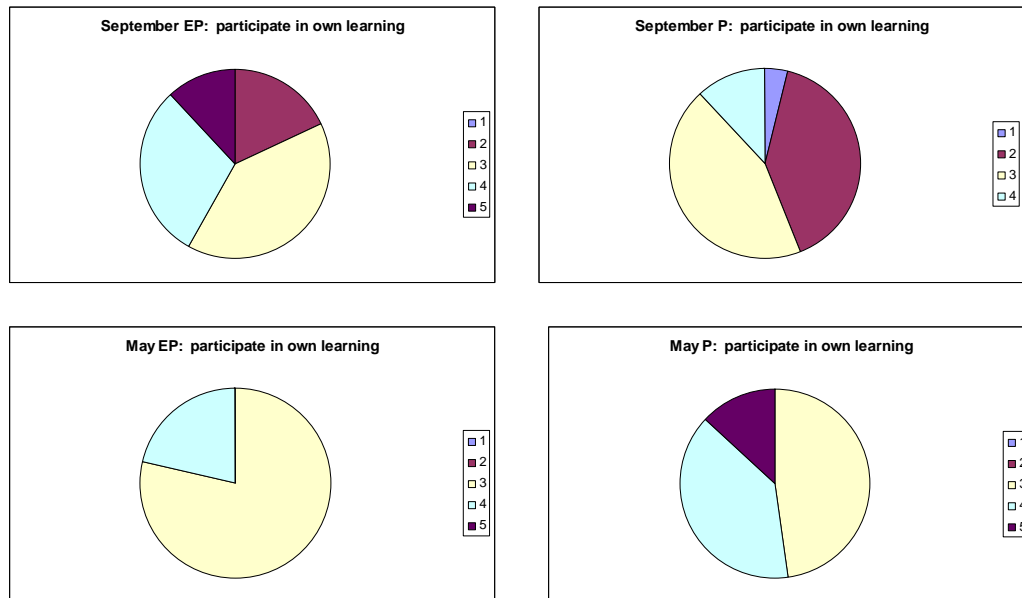
Chart 1



#### Commentary:

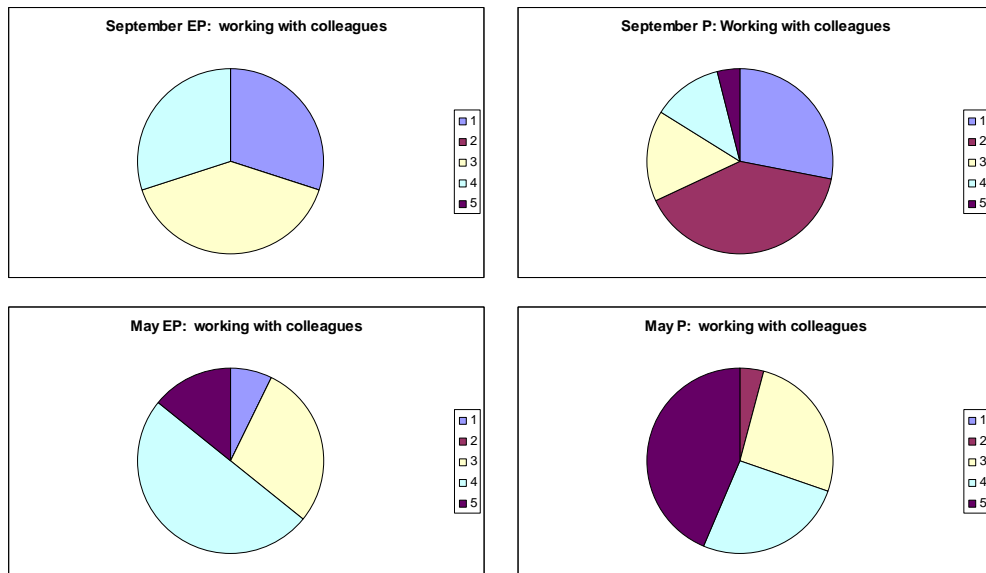
The results represented by these tables show an interesting shift towards the mid-range answer from September to May, particularly for the EP group. We consider that, as students received more peer support within the structure of module teaching, their perceived need for tutor support declined. If this is so, it represents a growth of student learning, not a deterioration in the standard of tutoring by staff. This may be indicative of a “shift in power” as intended. Appendix iv tutor “diary” refers to the initial question on this element of the work and there is some discussion there of the differences between Primary and Early Primary student groups at the outset of the project year. Could it be that EP students found the switch of approach more difficult because of this early difference?

Chart 2

**Commentary:**

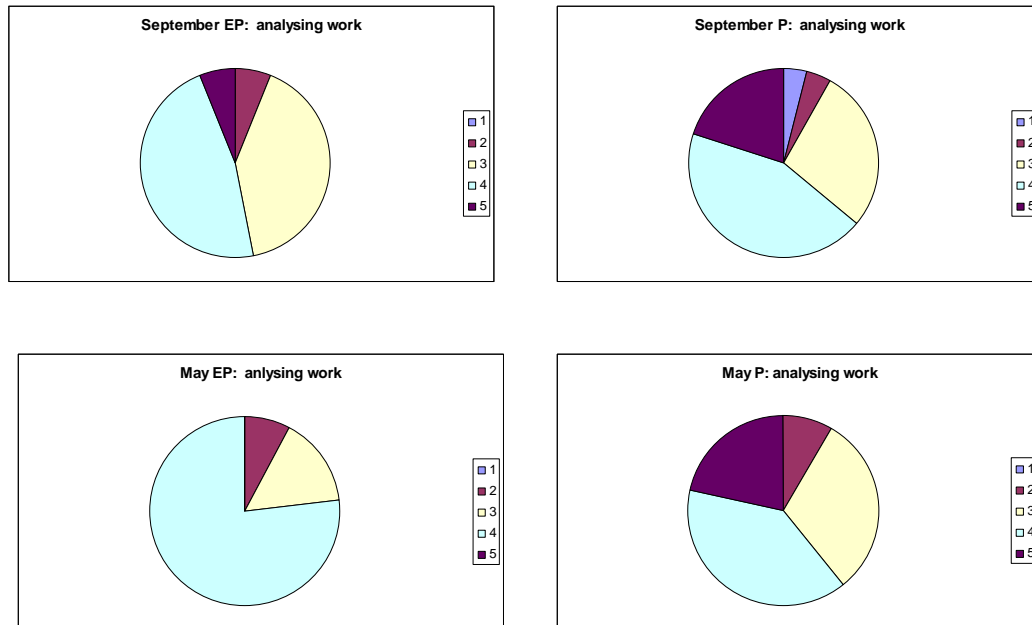
Although some of the more positive responses (Response 5 on the scale of disagree/agree) have disappeared between the start and end of module teaching, there is also a notable increase in the mid-range scores. This could possibly link to students forming a solid understanding of their involvement in learning and assessment. It remains to be investigated further in a fuller Phase 2 study.

Chart 3

**Commentary:**

There is a marked increase in the agreement of students with the statements about working with peer colleagues. In the Primary group this has moved substantially into the Response 5 (most agreement) and for the Early Primary group around 50% agree substantially [Response 4] with a smaller percentage of Response 5. This seems to be a notable change which may correspond to the changed teaching/learning approach being fostered.

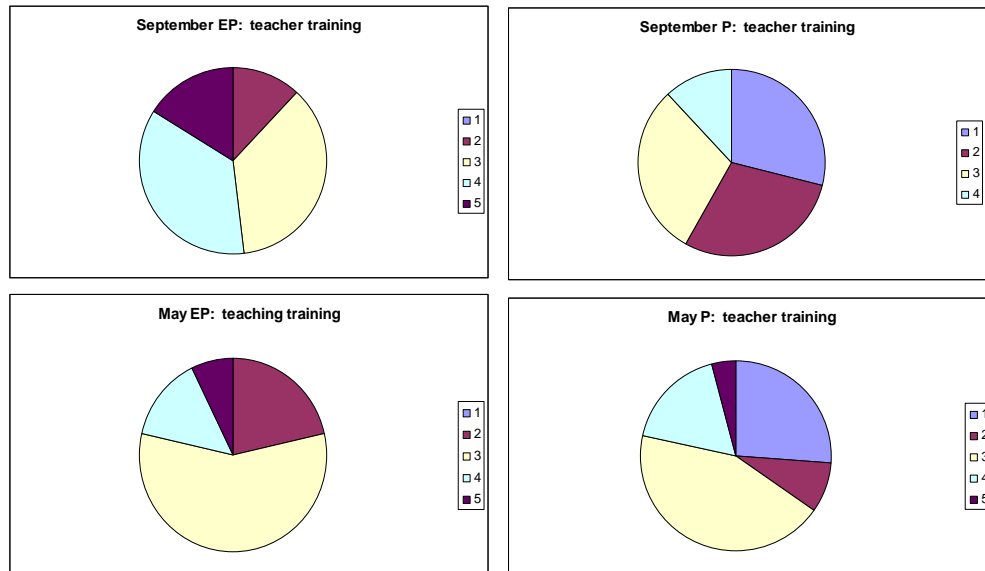
Chart 4



#### Commentary:

The overall findings represented here are difficult to interpret. The increase in Response 4 (particularly for the Early Primary group) highlights what may be a growing confidence in analysing the work of a peer. The loss of Response 5 for this group needs further investigation. For the Primary group, there may be an indication of progression with students better able to discriminate as they learn more skills. As an exploration of the issues involved and others raised during the work, this question requires thought, both in preparation for next teaching and in a more elaborate study.

Chart 5



#### Commentary:

The statement was – “The portfolio tasks had practical relevance to my training as a teacher”. The reduction in Response 5 between September and the following May for the Early Primary group (16% reducing to 7.1%) is difficult to interpret. In the initial questionnaire these students seem less sure of the purpose of the portfolio anyway (more students in the mid-range answer than giving Response 4 or 5). It could be that this viewpoint was not altered during the span of teaching sessions. There may be aspects of the students’ understanding of the underlying pedagogy for their chosen training which influences their perception of an approach which calls their skills into question and challenges their views. For this group, there is strength in their early years knowledge and practice and they may think it unjustified that they are required to work in peer discussion exploring this knowledge base. If these suggested factors are the case, further skill building and a raised awareness by students as we refine our teaching approach should reinstate their confidence.

For the Primary group there is an unaccountable disagreement with the statement (Response 1) which appears to persist throughout the year for some students, despite the activities and explanations which were intended to establish clear links between the portfolio tasks and the teacher training course overall, and despite the “high” response on another question probing their understanding of the portfolio purpose (more students in this group than in the EP group agreeing that the portfolio purpose was clear) It will remain a challenge to increase the engagement of this substantial minority of students if this emerges within new teaching groups in 2007/8.



Our discussion of these points for all groups demonstrates the direct relevance of the survey to our on-going teaching and our own reflective practice. The questionnaire is a useful measure so that tutors become familiar with student views and skills early in the module. Much remains to be investigated within all elements of these pilot findings and we have changes to the questionnaire planned to enable more depth of response and student approach to be surveyed and analysed in Phase 2.

### **Appendix iii**

#### **Student comments**

Interim informal comments from students appeared indicative of the way many appreciated the changes and saw advantages in the peer support approach.

*I feel the co-coaching portfolio sessions have helped me to stay on task, receive immediate feedback and support me to complete my tasks.*

*The portfolio work has helped me to monitor my progress and has ensured that I am consistently on task.*

*Co-coaching helped me to be more organised and it also allowed me to give feedback and my own view on other people's work.*

*I feel that co-coaching helps me to view and understand my own needs.*

The end-of-module questionnaire showed very positive and evaluative comments:

- Furthered my knowledge and understanding
- You're able to see what level your portfolio is at
- You get ideas on layout
- Useful to get others' comments
- Critically look at work
- (Skills) assessment (x2), evaluation (x2), structuring, reflection, confidence
- Sharing ideas (x2)
- Team work
- Setting targets
- Providing constructive feedback (x3)
- Demanding, not difficult
- Gives positive feedback (x3)
- Skills – Communication, discussion, assessing, analysing, time management, research skills, how to reflect and evaluate
- Curriculum and Government requirements
- How to support a peer (x2)
- How to include drama
- Peer co-operation and support
- Developed different skills I was in need of
- Objectivity (x2)
- Positive feedback
- Organisational skills
- Assessment skills
- Evaluating(x2)
- To use feedback (x7)
- To be constructive with criticism
- Organisational skills
- To use partnership when teaching
- Improving own work
- Highlights work missed (x2)
- Share useful information

Numbers in brackets indicate where several students have given similar comments and it is interesting to see the number of comments that refer to skills building (including an awareness of reflection) and to improvements in work attributed to the peer support approach.

## **Appendix iv**

### **Staff reflections**

Staff reflective “diary” notes – LM & CR-H record their experiences including tutor meetings and discussions

#### ***September 2006***

Planning for the module, need to take into account that this is likely to be an entirely new approach for level 2 undergraduates on this course. The literature search has already highlighted the need to ensure that students are aware of the rationale.

Deciding how to begin – tutor discussions about our common strategies. Aware that after the first session (introducing the idea) we will need to support students to consider their skill building. Again the literature encountered endorses the advantages of skills work ➔

Preparing CUREE materials which will suit our approach; adapting our teaching to include these in early sessions; and taking into account the particular context and purpose.

Questionnaires were answered by all students and initial scrutiny showed differences between the Early Primary and Primary groups. For instance based on their Level 1 experience, more of the Primary group trainees thought portfolio work “easy” (27.5%) compared with “difficult” (21.6%). Whereas, 13.9% in the Early Primary group considered it “easy” but 16.7% thought portfolio work “difficult”.

The results also showed a difference between the groups in respect of tutor support. In the Primary group 29% thought that in Year 1 of the course they had received “a lot of support” from the tutor, but 27% considered they had received “very little support”. Students in the Early Primary group 17% considered they had had “very little support”, whereas 31% answered that they had received “a lot of support”. See Chart 1 in Appendix ii for further detail.

#### ***October/November 2006***

Peer support sessions progressing well.

It is notable that discussions between students are focused and purposeful; that both students in the paired arrangement are able to set their own targets based on feedback.

The design of the feedback sheet kept by each student is working effectively – it is mainly filled in by the other student as constructive comment on the other’s portfolio, but that we have intentionally encouraged self-comment too. We had decided on this approach but now find it is substantiated in the literature that points to a combination of oral and written feedback being most effective.

As part of the record of meetings should students conduct the written self assessment prior to working with peer partner? We note these possibilities and vary this approach within different sessions.

#### ***December 2006/January 2007***

It is becoming clear that although student’s reflective skills are advancing, some students are still only looking at the superficial level of presentation within the portfolio, ie. their comments are mainly ‘authoritative/evaluative’ (see van den Berg et al, 2006).

Many members of each group however are making considerable effort to improve the content and quality of their own portfolio. Interim student comments collected informally are positive – see Appendix iii

We are seeing a range of materials researched by students to support their further learning after sessions (both subject knowledge and pedagogy). This is giving better quality results than with previous cohorts of students.

Tutors are able to sign off some elements of the portfolio as completed.

### ***April/May 2007***

Final sessions of the module and evaluation of portfolio by student partners seem effective in highlighting the strengths of each portfolio.

Most students also receiving peer comment about what is still needed, although tutor comment for final grading is also instrumental at this point. Previous sessions have demonstrated in all groups that there are learning conversations taking place and that this places the “power” clearly in the hands of the students – taking control of their own learning. (see Falchikov, 2005)

The final grading confirms the overall quality of the portfolios (eg. compared with tutors previous experience of both level 1 and level 2 submissions). Notably there are fewer submission which only just achieve a pass grade – the work of borderline students has been strengthened. Equally clear is the high quality of many submissions and the way in which all students have benefited from the portfolio as a formative task.

An overview of the peer support records shows that there is still little attempt by many students to be “probing” (see page 4 above). We are beginning to think that the tasks themselves, the wide range of materials in the portfolio and the lack of forum for further elaborated discussion may all be factors and we begin to consider adjustments for the future.

### ***May/June 2007***

We have met to consider the outcomes of the questionnaires used at the beginning and end of module and found several useful outcomes of the approach to match our expectations:

- student skills building – student engagement with the learning and assessment – greater reliance on peers but also greater independence in compiling the portfolio to meet a satisfactory standard – many portfolios incorporating quality materials and an organised approach to learning.

- o We conclude that there is much to recommend the approach and that we want, in future teaching, to switch the power base even more securely to the students – using a learning group structure and with clearly specified tasks. We want to encourage further collaboration and probing within these small groups.
- o This will link with a re-appraisal of the overall content of the portfolio and a revision of its format to include more electronic recording and sharing (as an e-portfolio).

Although the questionnaire (as a pilot) has effectively interrogated the student approach and some aspects of their development, we begin to consider amendments which will enable us to check the skill building more closely.